Immigrant Jewish identity and the female voice: Anzia Yezierska and Grace Paley

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In this essay I will show how Yezierska's Eastern European immigrant voice, with its Yiddish women's component, forges a new American identity while maintaining a Jewish identity. I will demonstrate further that voice is the legacy she leaves to the next generation of Jewish-American female writers, exemplified in the fiction of Grace Paley. Paley, born in the Bronx in 1922 to parents who came from Ukraine, would know the rhythms and intonations of Yezierska's stories from her own immigrant family, who were contemporaries of Yezierska.

In essence, Yezierska's work is about multiple marginalities for which she used the Yiddish-English dialect to enhance her depiction of her characters' ghetto life. Her voice contains a vibrant, heightened, high-pitched emotionalism and euphoria, candor and openness which is intensely affirmative even as her female narrators battle against poverty and Jewish-American immigrant patriarchy. In part, this narrative voice owes much to the verbal style of ghetto women's speech, of which Sally Ann Drucker writes, "Women's verbal styles differed from men's in the activities of quarreling, marketing, and worrying". Drucker also comments on how Yezierska "uses the emotional verbal style of Yiddish-speaking or dialect-speaking ghetto women in constructing her stories. The stories too, are expressive, tearful, joyous, and voluble. They have extremes and quick mood changes." (Drucker 110). This is because "Yiddish, considered a women's language for many centuries, developed an early literature primarily for women." It is this women's tradition Yezierska draws upon, as she uses the folk or oral tradition's devices of ghetto storyteller. In particular, she utilizes illiterate shtetl women's story-telling, deprecatingly called bobe-mayses or grandmother's tales.

Anzia Yezierska, born in Poland around 1880 in a town along the Vistula River, emigrated as a child to the United States with her family. Brought up on the Lower East Side in
Manhattan, she worked in garment shops and factories, and studied English in night school. Her first published story, "Fat of the Land," brought her recognition at age thirty-nine and in subsequent stories she continued to depict the immigrant Jewish experience, especially the Russian-Jewish, women's experience, and working class struggle.

Thomas J. Ferraro points out of Yezierska that, "In portraying her 'own people' her duty was to update the project of realism by investigating the reciprocal reshaping between Eastern European folk Judaism and the structures of opportunity in twentieth century America." (Ferraro 532) By the time Grace Paley starts writing, that project of assimilation has been largely achieved and Paley's women characters, as daughters of the generation Yezierska wrote about, are freer than Yezierska's were. Nevertheless, oppression and injustice remain in America. Through a comparison of Yezierska's voice with Paley's, I want to show how both writers' optimism and belief in change allows them to overcome their otherness as Jews and women and to achieve American success. At the same time, they never forget their origins. To use Julia Kristeva's term, their voices embody jouissance in their triumph over what Paley has called "the dark lives of women." (Hulley 27).

I begin with a discussion of the elements of Yezierska's immigrant female voice in her short stories. Then, through an analysis of Paley's stories, I will show how Paley's style evokes Yezierska's technique.

As Alice Kessler-Harris observes, "Yezierska's technique and subject grew out of the literary realism which was then the mode."(Kessler-Harris vi) Like the American realist writers, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Stephen Crane, Yezierska recreated the reality of social conditions in the early 1900's, in her case, the Jewish ghetto. Yet her stories do not, in my view, read like the conventional realism of her time. For one thing, Yezierska eschews form; there is little plot structure in her stories. Instead she relies on the excitement and urgency of her speaker's voice to convey the tenement lives her characters lead. Vivian Gornick describes this voice as "the slightly hallucinated cry of Yezierska's immigrant anguish." (Gornick ix) It as if the speaker cannot stop herself from talking, the partly anguished and partly joyful language spilling almost uncontrollably onto the page. This highly charged intense mode of narration, reflects, I believe, the speaker's submission to language itself, a language which is an amalgamation of the New World and the Old. She creates an immigrant language with its memories of the mother tongue, Yiddish, and a desire to be born anew as an English speaking American. Thus the subject of Yezierska's fiction, described by Kessler-Harris as hunger and Gornick as loss, is contained in the speaker's narration.

To these descriptions of her subject matter I would add the element of orality, evidenced in the titles of her work, for example, Hungry Hearts and The Breadgivers. Freud, in his essay on negation, links negation to the process through which the child takes in and ejects the objects of its world:

Expressed in the language of the oldest-the oral-instinctual impulses, the judgement is: 'I would like to eat this,' or I would like to spit this out'. (Freud 237)

Using Freud's formulation, I would suggest that Yezierska takes the dismal, poverty-stricken lonely conditions of her immigrant existence in, and then, in language, spits it out. Furthermore, the child-like excitation of her narration expresses her learning to speak a new tongue, as a child first learns to speak. Yezierska's writing is voraciously oral in its creation of a new form, Yiddish-American speech, and its content, hunger.
In her book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes:

Learning to speak is like trying to make one's own an oral 'object' which slips away, and whose necessarily deformed hallucination threatens us from the outside.

(Kristeva 4)

For Kristeva, writing is anti-phobic, which can be seen in Yezierska's obsessional voice which hungers, demands and exhausts. Her narrators' hunger for more than bread; they hunger for love.

Yezierska has said of her own work, "My one story is hunger. Hunger driven by loneliness." (CS 136) Consider, for example, the excessiveness of the quintessential Yezierska story "The Miracle" from *Hungry Hearts*. Starting in the old country and ending in the new, it begins:

Like all people who have nothing, I lived on dreams. With nothing but my longing for love, I burned my way through stone walls till I got to America. And what happened to me when I became an American is more than I can picture before my eyes, even in a dream. (CS 50)

But perhaps the most important hunger of all in Yezierska's narrators is the hunger "to make from myself a person." (CS115) This is the immigrant dream of Yezierska's female speakers, a dream that can be fulfilled through education in America. Her story "How I Found America" describes the Polish-Jewish villagers fear of the Cossack who forbids any gathering to study. But "In America you can say what you feel-you can voice your thoughts in the open streets without fear of a Cossack." (CS 132) The narrator hears the people saying on the journey to America in steerage, "Learning flows free." She thinks:

The words painted pictures in my mind. I saw before me free schools, free colleges, free libraries, where I could learn and learn and keep on learning. (CS 113)

But she is disappointed when the only free learning offered to her is at a trade school where the teacher, Mrs. Olney, tells her she needs to study something useful. "Did I come to America for a living?" she asks Mrs Olney and explains:

I came to give out all the fine things that was choked in me in Russia. I came to help America make the new world...They said in America I could open up my heart and fly free in the air-to sing-to dance-to live-to love. (CS 121)

In this story as in others, the speaker is ultimately disappointed and overcome by the poverty, lack of opportunity, sweatshop conditions and misunderstanding of immigrants that she finds in America. Education and learning become the dream she pursues to "become a person" and America the "mantra" she repeats over and over, her answer to her hungers which can never be assuaged. For, in part, she creates her own difficulties, which Mrs. Olney explains to her:

'You know some of us', she went on- 'not many unfortunately- have a sort of divine fire which if it does not find expression turns into smoke. This egoism and self-centeredness which troubles you is only the smoke of repression.' (CS 127)

Yezierska presents the hungers, dreams, and frustrations of Jewish immigrant women through first person narrators who speak a dialect that gives a sense of immediacy and urgency to their plight. She can express her characters' urgent needs not only through dialect, but through cursing. As Sally Ann Drucker points out,"No previous characters in Jewish-American literature surpass Yezierska's women when it comes to swearing and cursing--another example of Yezierska's ear for language." (Drucker 109) For example, Hannah Breineh can yell at a fruit vendor, "A black year on you, robber, swindler," In a more lyric vein, she sprinkles her stories with tender Yiddish expressions such as an
occasional "Ach." With these expressions she conveys emotion which achieves late nineteenth century realism but also her own brand of emotionalism. Often the Yiddish expression is filtered through an American translation for the Yiddish word. For example, her use of the word "person" is a signifier for the Yiddish expression mensch, which has the meaning of being a real person.

16 Yezierska has been criticized for the overly emotional tone of her writing. I would argue that her excessiveness grasped the emotional reality of American immigrant women's lives and voiced the lives of ordinary women. Her legacy to Grace Paley is that consciousness of the ordinary lives of Jewish women and their struggle to create a new identity in America which Paley expresses in her stories.

17 Like Yezierska, Grace Paley works out of an oral tradition which stems from shtetl story telling, uses formless or non-linear structure and employs an Eastern European Jewish accented voice. That voice, like Yezierska's, is conversational and intimate. Frequently, especially in her early stories, she uses a female narrator, Faith, who is part of an urban community which encompasses the park, the school, the library. Faith's assimilated neighborhood replaces Yezierska's immigrant shtetl.

Still, Paley's characters' voices hearken back to Yezierska's.

18 As Judith Arcana points out about Paley's language:

Certainly her frequent use of the I-narrator and the style of her dialogue—now almost always without quotation marks—produce a spoken quality in tone and language, encouraging readers to feel they are being addressed directly and personally or are overhearing an actual exchange. (Arcana 5)

19 Though her idiom is tempered by narrative distance and irony, Paley carries on the oral story telling tradition of Yezierska. She pays homage to that tradition and preserves the past by having the elder generation tell her the stories of their lives. Her European past, which she imparts to her children, is always in the present, filtered through a Jewish humor. As they walk on Brighton Beach she tells her sons:

Hey boys, look at the ocean. You know you had a great-grandfather who lived way up north on the Baltic Sea, and you know what, he used to skate, for miles and miles along the shore, with a brown herring in his pocket. (LD 35)

20 Paley's women, like Yezierska's, are preoccupied with finding love and with men's betrayals. The first story, "Goodbye and Good Luck," of her first collection, The Little Disturbances of Man is about Aunt Rose, who narrates the story of her suitors and her relationship with Vlashkin, a married actor in the Jewish theatre, to her niece, Lillie. By using a Jewish idiom, Paley reenacts family history while revising it. Rose's sister pitied her for never marrying, but in Paley's retelling, unmarried Aunt Rose's life had more richness than her mother's:

Poor Rosie! If there was more life left in my little sister, she would know my heart is a regular college of feelings and there is such information between my corset and me that her whole married life is a kindergarten. (LD 22)

21 After years of living with and without Vlashkin, he gets a divorce and marries Rose, who wants Lillie's mother to know:

So now darling, Lillie, tell this story to your mama from your young mouth. She don't listen to a word from me. She only screams, "I'll faint, I'll faint." Tell her after all I'll have a husband, which as everybody knows, a woman should have at least one before the end of the story. (LD 22)

22 As Jeane Sallade Criswell observes of the story's ending:
In this final twist, Paley works to ensure our recognition that she is not so much after verisimilitude...what she is really after is a final acknowledgement of the openendedness of life and the possibility of change. (Criswell 99)

Yet, Paley, like Yezierska, doesn't valorize her Jewish women characters; rather, as with Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, she empowers them to speak as they are. Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, a resident of a retirement home where Faith in "Faith in the Afternoon" goes to visit her parents, is president of "The Children of Judea's Grandmother's Wool Socks Association," a group that knits for the elderly residents of the home. The absurdity and sadness of the group as the only institution through which old people can exercise power, foregrounds Paley's portrayal of Mrs. Hegel-Shtein who is a bossy, interfering and opinionated know-it-all, as representative of first generation immigrant women, now grandmothers.

Paley and Yezierska are appalled by the unpleasant characteristics of these first generation women. Paley mocks Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, by naming the garrulous, opinionated old lady, who knows something about everything, after the German philosopher. Yezierska shows Hannah Breineh as a woman so traumatized by poverty that she cannot love her children. But both writers are also empathetic, recognizing themselves in
mothers who had to be hardhearted in their daily struggles with hunger, dirt, prejudice, and learning a new language. To give voices to these obnoxious women, and to preserve their English-Yiddish speech, is to bear witness to the cruelties of their lives, which included loss of their mother tongue, their mother country, and their children's love. As Vivian Gornick points out of Yezierska's work, "The immigrant experience is Yezierska's idiom, but the subject is original loss." (CS x)

30 Yezierska wrote of her art:

I am sure of this, that the utterance of the ignorant like me is something like the utterance of the dying. It's mixed up and incoherent, but it has in it the last breath of life and death. (CS 132)

31 She passed on this last breath of life and death, the transforming power of language, to Paley, her literary daughter, who creates immigrant dialogue anew in her work. Her ear for dialogue, like Yezierska's, grows out of the oral story-telling tradition of the ghetto.

32 Paley also inherits Yezierska's Russian-Jewish idealism which arose from oppression in the old country. Her narrator Faith's parents' memories of the Czar carry the weight of history that Yezierska's narrators bear. Writing about the father in the title story of her collection *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, Faith observes:

International generosity had been started in him during the late nineteenth century by his young mother and father, candleholders inside the dark tyranny of the czars. It was childhood training. Thoughtfully, he passed it on. (EC 125)

33 Paley's optimisim that the world and people can be changed, evident in her narrator Faith's name, can be seen in her resistance to narrative closure and her belief in stories to reveal the real lives of women. In "A Conversation with My Father" story-telling becomes the subject of the story. Faith makes up a story for her father while visiting him in the hospital. Her father thinks it is right that her character's life ends in tragedy. He says, "The end. The end. You were right to put that down. The end." She replies, "Well, it is not necessarily the end, Pa." (EC 172) Faith resists giving her woman protagonist a tragic fate. She tells him, "She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on." (EC 173)

34 Through voice, Paley and Yezierska empower women to live an authentic life, and to create an identity which is both American and Jewish. Yezierska's women endlessly talk, argue, assert, complain as the words pour out of them. Paley's female characters wise-crack, correct men, and say, like Shirley Abromowitz, "My voice was certainly the loudest." (LD 63) Even though Shirley's mother and father, the butcher, and the neighbors caution her to be quiet, she gets the part in the Christmas play, though she is Jewish. Her family opposes this but finally, her father concludes that being in the play helps to learn about others' history. "Does it hurt Shirley to speak up?" he says. (LD 59) Storytelling, even that of the Christians, foments change and besides, the story suggests, Shirley's voice will always be heard.

35 So it is natural that like a Yezierska narrator, Paley's in her story "Wants," would visit the library, hungry for education which she cannot find only in books and say, "I want, for instance, to be a different person." (EC13)
BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. Quotations from Yezierska's stories will be cited parenthetically using the abbreviation CS for How I found America: The Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska.

2. Quotations from Paley's stories will be cited parenthetically using the following abbreviations: The Little Disturbances of Man DM; Enormous Changes at the Last Minute: EC; Later the Same Day; LD.

Ainsi qu’il transparaît dans l’œuvre de Grace Paley, l’héritage intellectuel que Anzia Yezierska laissa à la génération suivante d’auteurs juives américaines, est sa voix : voix d’immigrante, voix de juive de l’Europe de l’Est, surtout voix de femme. Née dans le Bronx en 1922 de parents Ukrainiens, Paley a sans doute goûté, grâce à eux, aux rythmes et intonations particuliers des histoires de Yezierska, qui pour dépeindre la vie de ghetto des personnages, utilise un anglais tributaire de l’idiome yiddish. Le débat sur les éléments caractéristiques de la voix de Yezierska qu’entreprend cet article est suivi d’une étude de quelques histoires de Grace Paley dans le but d’illustrer comment le style de la dernière évoque celui de la première. Chez les deux auteurs, c’est la voix derrière le texte qui aide les femmes à vivre de manière authentique en se forgeant une identité autant américaine que juive.

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